HIV COMMENTARY

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Columnist Robert De Andreis

Passing the torch

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

Beyond the night lies the end of the AIDS story. When a cure is found, there will be dancing in the streets and a candlelight march, and the ghosts of the dead will rise from a disco inferno.

In the sultry *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, the story-telling thief says to his captors, "Don't cut off my head and I'll tell you one more story." So I beg you, don't write me off because I'm changing the focus of my work. AIDS has almost claimed my life and I'll be dammed if I let it claim my story.

My coming-of-age tale, brought to you in vivid, steamy detail, is very much at the heart of my own AIDS story, the part of the story most people don't like talking about, when the sexual revolution altered the course of gay human history. Allow me to pass the torch songs of my past to a new generation of gay kids who don't have any gay parents to guide them.

This column is dedicated to my old friend Dexter, who died last week from AIDS. He died in the arms of his caregiver and former lover Barry, who inspired me with his deep love and devotion to Dex. It is particularly because of his passing that I have taken this turn in my work. Dexter represents the last of a world that no longer exists for me, a world that many of us have lost time and time again.

When friends die, the memory of your shared experience dies too. After Dexter's lover died, Dex sold me their couch and coffee table. Ten years ago, we all did piles of drugs on that couch. Now it sits here in my last living room, a silent witness covered with the scattered piles of my new life: all my unanswered reader's mail, bills I'll never pay and the get well cards that I never sent to Dexter.

Because I'm hopelessly unorganized and in desperate need of an occasional volunteer secretary (readers?), things remain in stacks. I have saved every single letter and card sent to me and put them in binders for archival purposes. I have felt all along that much of the mail wasn't so much about me per se, but expressed the community's thoughts and feelings on this plague. I feel that these letters belong to the community. I never wanted them to end up in a dusty old box in my parent's garage. So, unless you write me to object, all my personal letters generated from this *Sentinel* stint will one day become part of the permanent archival materials in the new Gay and Lesbian Center in the San Francisco Public Library, which officially opens in March of next year. I hope to live to see that day.

In another part of the library, where the city records are kept, the names of five generations of my family are documented in big, leather-bound volumes. I didn't just fall off the Greyhound bus. I've never been the new girl in town. My family history is deeply rooted here, much to my chagrin. I would have run away in a heartbeat to be a part of the sexual '70s, but unfortunately, native San Franciscans don't run away from home.

Instead, I changed into my slutty clothes, tiptoed out of the house every night and began a lifetime of double lives — high school academic achiever by day, nasty, dope-smoking, acid-dropping, Quaalude-popping Polk Street hustler by night. Typical teenage stuff.

But I don't want to bore you. Maybe you'd rather read more ghastly AIDS eyeball stories or details of my latest drug reaction rash.

Don't cut my head off just yet, guys: It gets better.

When my first sexual mentor told me during our regular secret meetings that he had sex with about 2,000 men in his 30-odd years, it seemed mathematically impossible. As I sat in his school office every day, week after week, and listened to him tell me about his early life and all his encounters as a hustler, I was shocked and awestruck. That summer I helped him rehearse lines to play the lead in a local production of *The Boys in the Band*, so I had my fill of gay culture.

He also told me to read John Rechy's *City of Night*, a book not on the regular reading list in my high school. Whether he initiated, perpetrated, recruited, guided or mentored me, he gave me a graphic crash course on the sleazy side of the gay sex world. He trained me, coached me, groomed me, and of course, fucked me many times that summer some 20 years ago.

By the fall, I knew how to hustle, had dropped acid he'd given me and had been passed around and pawed by his sordid friends. I even screwed his bisexual wife; she had something between her legs called a va ... va ... oh, I can't remember what they call it. They were the first ones to make a big deal of something I had been completely oblivious about: They told me I had a stunning, party-sized devil dick that was just bursting to meet its public! She would say, "Oh honey, you could walk into any gay bar and pick out what you want." It was a lie — there was a limited market for pretty boys in a town full of village people — but it was the most electrifying thing you could have told a 16-year-old gay boy born in the promised land.

My insatiable quest, a lifetime of looking for love in all the wrong places, eventually matched and exceeded

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my mentor's trick volume. These past 20 years have been filled with experiences I've mostly blocked out. It's a tale not unfamiliar to many, but unimaginable to most. It's the story of a time and a place a time long ago, one that will never come again, may it rest in peace. Before it's forever entombed, I will be rattling these old bones in your face, as usual. If you start to feel uncomfortable, amused, shocked and excited, with just a hint of penis envy, then I'm doing my job. **SFS**